

## **The Early Life of Louis Sullivan: The Inspiration for the Genius**

Katy Lieder

*Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale*

*Teacher: Patricia Grimmer*

The flat glass skyscrapers soar hundreds of feet into the air. These skyscrapers are envisioned by people sitting at drafting tables sketching with exact mathematical precision the length of each and every line. People measure angles with a compass and protractor, sitting lost in the world of numbers. Architecture is math. These skyscrapers, full of style and character, are envisioned by people sitting at drafting tables, sketching the thoughts from their heads, putting art into a three dimensional form. People draw ornaments and flourishes, making beauty from concrete and steel. Architecture is art. The man with the perfect blend of the two: Louis Sullivan. One of the most famous modern architects of Chicago, he was a man who believed that “the man who has not the impulse within him will not have the style.” Where did his impulse come from? The early life of Louis Sullivan illustrates quite clearly what he was going to become. Louis Sullivan became an architect, poet, and artist.

From his earliest childhood, Sullivan had what he called a “picture memory.” This combined with his inquisitive nature made Louis Sullivan a bright and creative youth. Luckily, his parents nurtured his artistic abilities. Sullivan’s mother was a piano player and his father was a dance instructor; also, both parents were fine hands at drawing the natural world. She drew leaves and flowers, and he drew landscapes of admirable quality. Coming from a family such as this, it was no surprise when small Louis took to art as well.

Louis discovered early his love for buildings, giving them character, shape and form; he even improved some of them inside his own head. Perhaps this was the seed of Sullivan’s later obsession with ornamentation. He could not leave a building blank-faced. Each one had to have personality and life. However, buildings were a secondary fascination to him, following that of

nature in its purest element. Sullivan went so far as to name a tree standing by the road on his way to school his “Great Friend.”

School was not a favorite place for this precocious boy. He sat and stared out the window, watching the birds and squirrels frolicking outside, or sometimes examining the way his schoolhouse was built. Try as he might to please his grandparents, who emphasized education, he found himself with low grades and a reputation for laziness. And yet, doting as most grandparents are, they saw his uncommon brightness and encouraged it whenever they could. At home, Louis had long conversations with his grandfather about the constellations, life, the hows, and the whys. Finally, Louis could no longer stand the institution of school. One day, stuffing his shirt with rolls from the bakery, he escaped to the wilderness. He spent the whole day building a dam in a nearby creek, and when evening came, he destroyed the dam, reveling in the wonder of the rushing water.

Louis Sullivan was a blunt child, often aggravating his mother, whose public theory was that children should be seen and not heard. In truth, though, she was delighted by his honesty and kept a book of the amusing words he uttered. His honesty and questioning nature later shows through in his architecture: clear cut lines, intriguing ornamentation, a combining of the elements, the first truly modern work. At the same time, “had anyone asked Louis Sullivan [later in life] what he was in a word, and had he been willing to answer, he might have said he was a poet, perhaps an artist, but probably not an architect.”

Louis left home to go to Boston Tech at the age of fifteen, where once again he found school too restricting. Showing his true spirit of independence he quit Tech and went to work for the architect Frank Furness in Philadelphia. Most of Furness’s apprentices were educated architects coming out of college, not seventeen-year-old boys, but Sullivan approached him

humbly and managed to make an impression. It was here that Sullivan finally learned the beginnings of original architecture and the creating of a fresh style.

Above all else, Sullivan's architecture was original. Though borrowing from the old time styles of Europe, and from the newer styles of the Americas, he came up with something that had never been seen before. Sullivan envisioned the first logical steel framed skyscraper, embracing the height rather than being embarrassed by it. The modern steel framed skyscraper is based on his work. Another aspect to Sullivan's work was his attempt to unify it with nature. He was an advocate of working with the land, rather than change the land to fit the building. Louis Sullivan never forgot his Great Friend. But Sullivan did not only try to unify his work with nature, he also tried to pull together the field of modern architecture with that of art. Many of his buildings are best known for their ornamental flourishes and attention to detail. The facade of the building was just as important as the practicality: beauty and purpose were one in his mind.

More than just being an architect or an artist, Louis Sullivan was a poet. Everything he did had style and grace and, most importantly, was fresh and new. Even when describing his own work, Sullivan was different. A shy young man newly come to Chicago, he refused to speak about his architecture in the analytical and mathematical style of his predecessors. Sullivan wrote,

in tranquility of meditation the soul unites with nature as raindrops  
unite with the sea; whence are exhaled vapors, under the hot  
and splendid sun of inspired imagination, vapors rising  
through the atmosphere of high endeavor to drift away in  
beauteous clouds borne upon the imponderable winds of

purpose, to condense and descend at last as tangible realities.

Louis Sullivan was influenced deeply by the world around him; this was the source of his every idea. Without this man, modern architecture would not be what it is today. Though few recognize it, this free spirited and interesting child grew up into one of the most profound artists and poets of his time. [From David S. Andrew, *Louis Sullivan and the Polemics of Modern Architecture*; Albert Bush-Brown, *Louis Sullivan*; Willard Connelly, *Louis Sullivan As He Lived*; Louis Sullivan, *A System of Architectural Ornamentation*; Louis Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea*; Louis Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats*; Louis Sullivan, *The Testament of Stone*; Robert Twombly, ed., *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*.]